

Women's Struggles through Collective Action in The Gambia, 1950s to 1970

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Abstract: Women have a long history of organizing collective action in The Gambia. This article argues that, since authorities failed to serve women's interests, Gambian women resorted to using collective action to overcome their challenges through *kafoolu* and *kompins* [women's grassroots organizations] operating in rural and urban areas. They shifted their efforts towards organizations that focused on social and political change. These women's organizations grew significantly as they helped women to promote social and economic empowerment. Women cultivated political patronage with male political leaders to achieve their goals. Political leaders who needed popular support to buttress their power under the new republican government cashed in patronage. Despite their efforts in politics, there is very limited research on women's political contribution to The Gambia, especially through activism. This paper adds much needed data to this discourse by discussing the collective action of Gambian women in their struggles to gain "voice." Thus, this study relies on primary data from oral interviews. Secondary sources, such as academic journals, and books, provide context to the study.

Keywords: Collective action, politics, grassroots organizations, patronage, struggle.

Introduction

Some scholars agree that grassroots activism created an avenue for political participation in national campaigns for decolonization and independence in Africa.¹ Many African women, however, were sidelined by colonial states, marginalized in decision-making processes by decolonization movements, and negatively affected by economic crises and political failure of post-colonial states on the continent.² This marginality strongly influenced Gambian women, both individually and collectively. These women developed strategies through collaboration to defend their economic and political interests within the colonial and postcolonial environments. They became significant allies of politicians and political parties, expecting these individuals and parties would resolve their plight by providing them with necessities in their communities.

Since authorities failed to serve their interests, Gambian women resorted to using collective action to overcome their challenges through *kafoolu* and *kompins*—women's grassroots organizations operating in the rural and urban areas.³ These organizations focused on social and political change, and their collective efforts comprised women from various backgrounds. Between the late 1950s and early 1960s, these *kafoolu* and *kompins* became visible in national politics. The women cultivated political patronage with male political leaders to achieve their economic goals; political leaders who needed popular support to buttress their political power under the new republican government cashed in that patronage. Thus, women helped build the

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new government, but from a position of political clientelism rather than a position of political authority.

The eventual formation of the republican state could not have occurred without the political involvement of a broad network of women's grassroots organizations.⁴ The Gambia became a republic on April 24, 1970.⁵ Gambians ceased to be subjects of Britain and became citizens of their own sovereign state, free to frame a constitution that attended to their wishes and aspirations.⁶ Prime Minister Dawda Kairaba Jawara was sworn in as the country's first president soon after the announcement of results of the referendum in which 70 percent of the electorate voted for the republic.⁷ Thus, Sir Farimang Sighateh's position as Governor General ended. To secure the referendum vote for the republic in place of monarchy, women assured the People's Progressive Party (PPP) and its leader of their support.

The Gambia's colonial past continued to have a significant effect on its socio-economic formation, geography, and political orientations. Senegal surrounds the country on all sides except for the west, where its boundary is the Atlantic Ocean. This was not a historical coincidence as Britain and France demarcated the boundaries of The Gambia in the late 1880s and made subsequent modifications.⁸ The country is the smallest on Africa's mainland, with a population of 1.8 million.⁹ American journalist Berkley Rice described The Gambia's independence as the "birth of an improbable nation" because of the country's weak economy, poor infrastructure, and massive illiteracy, among other factors.¹⁰ These challenges likely informed Richard Burton's harsh description of Bathurst as "nothing but mud, mangroves, malaria and miasma."¹¹ This impoverishment was profoundly apparent in the rural areas, which contained more than half of the population. The country relied only on the export of peanuts for revenue to support the government in its provision of services such as health and education, which were mostly centralized. Conditions became difficult during the rainy season from shortages of food, as farmers awaited the next harvest.¹² All these factors produced negative perceptions of the country's socio-economic and political prospects. Despite the uncertainty of the country's ability to survive as a nation, Gambians remained undeterred in their pursuit of self-rule.

Historical Literature

Before and since independence Gambian women have continuously organized themselves through collective actions. They have used it as a tool to empower one another which has had a profound effect on their lives. Recognizing women's grassroots organizations, politicians understood the power of women in these groups. Even though scholars have written on and about women, *kompins* and *kafoolu* were not their focus. For instance, Hassoum Ceesay's work mentions *kompins* but they are not discussed in detail, while *kafoolu* remain absent. Instead, he examines the stories of prominent women of Bathurst, such as Augusta Jawara, Hannah Foster, and Fatou Khan-McCullum of Upper Saloum. Likewise, Ralphina Almeida discusses personal case stories of Gambian women between the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the new millennium.¹³ Whereas the works of other scholars—e.g., Arnold Hughes and David Perfect, Patience Sonko-Godwin, Abdoulaye Saine, Nana Grey-Johnson, Bala Saho, and Donald Wright—provide a wealth of information on The Gambia, especially its political history, other scholarship demonstrates the relevance of women farmers in Gambian agriculture and the

socio-economic contributions of women.¹⁴ These works, however, make little or no reference to grassroots women's organizations.

African women's collective action was instrumental to liberation struggles across the continent. Scholars such as Filomina Chioma Steady, Susan Geiger, Deborah Pellow, Elizabeth Schmidt, and Ampofo Akosua Adomako examine the way women's political participation transformed societies and the roles movements played in societal success or failure.¹⁵ Geiger describes women as 'neglected' despite their efforts and linked this constraint to patriarchy. These scholars hold the view that African women's political participation diminished after independence in part due to illiteracy.¹⁶ The findings of the present study, however, suggest that women's grassroots organizations were significant political actors despite their illiteracy. This article, therefore, relies principally on interviews with women who were or are still leaders of *kompins* and *kafoolu* in The Gambia (known as *yai kompins* and *kafukuntiyolu* in Wolof and Mandinka, respectively) as well as men who worked directly with women and other members of women's organizations such as *Tamba Sansan Kambe Kafoo*, *Kabun Kept Kafoo*, *Soma One Heart*, *Kafou Saba* and women farmers associations from the seven regions of the country. These regions are the Banjul City Council and Kanifing Municipal Council [constituting the Greater Banjul Areas], West Coast, North Bank, Lower River, Central River, and the Upper River Regions. Their responses were analyzed to produce a collective narrative as members of *kafoolu* and *kompins*. The Gambia national archive contains little about these groups.

British Colonial Influence and History of Women's Organizations

British colonial rule influenced the organization of political life and culture of the people of Bathurst and, by extension, all Gambians. British colonialism and the settlement of liberated Africans or repatriated free slaves from the New World (known as *Aku*) brought European education, Christianity, and new languages to the Gambian people.¹⁷ Western culture, which seemed to dominate the Colony of Bathurst and its surroundings, coexisted with local cultures among indigenous settlers. This combination molded the ebb and flow of city life in colonial Bathurst. Islam had blended with existing cultural practices and cemented male hegemony in the rural areas. A report in the 1940s revealed that the colonial government, in recognition of the importance of Islam, desired to have a representative of the Muslim community in the Legislative Council. But it had to choose a man from Bathurst, as there was no one in the Protectorate [inland territory] with sufficient knowledge of English to follow the proceedings.¹⁸ Consequently, Ousman Jeng was selected on 22 March 1922 by the Bathurst Muslim Council. Level of Western education became one of the major differences between the urban and the rural areas.

British colonial education and Christianity introduced by missionaries influenced early women's organizations in Bathurst. As an illustration, members of social clubs were overwhelmingly educated *Aku* women and girls.¹⁹ The present study has identified two categories of *kompins* that emerged during the colonial era in Bathurst. One was the group comprising predominantly Christian educated and working-class women such as: Women's Contemporary Society, Gambia Women's Federation, Women's Corona Society, Girl Guides, Girls Friendly Society; religious-based groups such as Methodist Women's Association, Mother's Union; and former pupils' associations, namely Methodist Girls High School

(MGHS).²⁰ In the second category were women less literate in the Western education system and overwhelmingly Muslim. They were married and while some of them were stay-at-home mothers, most of their membership engaged in trade at the market or homemade canteens. Members served as a support system to one another with a common value system. They embarked on local banking schemes (*osusu*).²¹ Occasionally, they organized entertainment programs (*sabar*) as a way of strengthening the association.²² Prior to the 1950s, none of these groups involved themselves in mainstream politics.

Through *kompins*, women engaged in diverse activities such as education, health, entertainment, and humanitarian services. Educated or elite women's groups dedicated themselves to empower women and girls across the country, although they began in the city before expanding the advocacy into the interior. For example, the Women's Contemporary Society and Gambia Women's Federation employed education as a tool for the advancement of women and girl child interests. They organized reach outs and urged parents to send their daughters to school. As a founding member of the above organizations, Busy Bees, and Women's Corona Society, people knew Rosamond Fowlis for her crusade in Kombo areas encouraging parents to enroll their daughters in school. These organizations rallied women of diverse backgrounds to deliberate matters for the common good. They organized a "baby award" annually and offered incentives to mothers of the healthiest babies.²³ They sensitized city residents on proper sanitation and hygiene, especially in underserved neighborhoods and among poor families.

Members of these organizations, predominantly teachers and nurses from the Aku ethnolinguistic population, had significant interaction with Europeans that influenced their cultural lifestyle. Some of them were exposed to different educational environments that provided a broad awareness of social justice and the potential for social change experienced in other parts of the world, especially in British West African colonies between 1945 and 1960. For example, Fowlis was trained in England and was a domestic science teacher for over three decades. Louise Njie studied at Achimota College in Gold Coast [Ghana]; Lydia Joiner, Eliza Coker, and Lilia Johnson studied at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone. Augusta Hannah Jawara proceeded to Edinburgh to study nursing after attending MGHS. Likewise, Lucretia S.C Joof studied in London.²⁴ Studying abroad gave these women an understanding of the struggle for self-determination and internal self-rule. They also resisted male hegemony blinded by gender stereotypes and discrimination. By advocating for mass education for girls, they were the vanguard of a struggle for social change and the dismantling of gender barriers.

Women in Bathurst, through collective action, became supportive of veterans during the Second World War. The British colonial administration promoted the establishment of Gambian Women with the outbreak of World War II that prompted War Workers between 1939 and 1945. Members attended to the conditions of wounded soldiers and their families. Such an act showed not only owing allegiance to one's country but showing loyalty to the colonial power.²⁵ The leaders of this association were prominent women of Bathurst and were wives of important men of the city. Mrs. Njie was the wife of nationalist leader Pierre S. Njie, and Mrs. J.A Mahoney was the wife of the first speaker of the Legislative Council, Sir John Andrew Mahoney, while other women, Lucy Joiner and Gumala Jones, also played a leadership role. Despite the colonial government's inadequate preparations to fund the humanitarian project,

the association had an estimated account of nine hundred and ninety-four British pounds sterling in December 1941 from its members' fundraising.²⁶

The rise in community service and the women's empowerment approach led these disparate categories of *kompins* to converge in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Gambia Women Federation extended its membership to ex. Pupils' association, Old Girls of St. Joseph's association, and *Musu kafoo* society to represent all women across the country.²⁷ By 1955 and 1956, many members of these organizations had identified with the emergent political parties through the women's wings. Whereas *kompins* followed a Western model of organizational structure such as the idea of girls', ladies, and gentlemen clubs because of the acculturation process influenced by the British colonial rule, *kafoolu* have their roots in the precolonial era, originally as traditional associations. *Kafoolu* and *kompins* became intertwined with the purpose of enhancing women's economic and social freedom.

Gambian women's ability to cultivate solidarity strengthened their collectivity. Despite the hostility of the colonial environment, women contested and negotiated with the system that gagged them. Women adopted different approaches to defend their economic and political interests within the British administrative system, which led to collective action efforts by groups from various regional and ethnolinguistic origins. Bala Saho's work portrays women's sense of solidarity in the *Qadi* court during the colonial period; "women-built networks along kinship lines at a social gathering, and through the market."²⁸ One woman's success in court was a success for other women. One of such instances was the landmark case of Horriyah Jobe.²⁹

There is a long-standing history of women's network in rural Gambia. But to date, we have found little evidence stating exactly when *kafoolu* were created. By illustration, community development practitioner Njaga Jawo concedes that:

We did not form *kafoos*; we found them there. People will claim that they form *kafoos*. Normally that is what people will say, but *kafoos* were here from days immemorial, even before we were born. What we did know is that we strengthened the *kafoos* and empowered them, but we found them there. So even before you and I were born, we found *kafoos* in our villages.³⁰

This statement stands out because the origin of *kafoolu* could not be linked to any specific period. However, some people have differing opinions. For Suwaibou Touray, women *kafoolu* emerged after independence. He claimed that the culture [farm work for prosperous families in the farming communities in return for reward] was that "it was the male and female youth who were in this culture before independence. Women's *kafoos* only came into being later after independence to partake in the farm work of this type or simply work for pay. It was these women *kafoos* that were infiltrated by politicians who then patronized them to gain their support. They borrowed this culture from the Bathurst area to the provinces deforming the word *kafoo* to that of *kompin* and for Mandinka '*kompinoo*."³¹ Others establish the distinction between *kompins* and *kafoolu* was based on mixed gender. According to Sulayman Touray, *kompins* comprised different women and men, but the members were usually within the same age bracket or generation.³² Binta Jammeh-Sidibe and Omar B. Jallow asserted that the idea of *kafoo* was brought to the city by rural-urban migrants, therefore metamorphosing into the concept of *kompin* in Bathurst and its surroundings.³³

Although there are divergent views about commonalities between *kafoolu* and *kompins*, this research concludes that their differences lie in their mode of operation or in the context in which the terms are used. As Saho states, the Colony could not provide “ethnic and kinship security,” the formation of social network became inevitable as a survival technique to the changing conditions in the urban areas.³⁴ Ethnolinguistic and economic aspirations and interests motivated these alliances, as with Mandinkas from Badibu of the North Bank Region and Serahuli from Garawuli of the Upper River Region.³⁵ These Bathurst *kafoolu* and *kompins* were based on strong ethnolinguistic community ties and grouped men who were mostly clothes and textile traders who usually operated in Albert market. Most of them had lived in different areas in Bathurst, called Half-Die and Tobacco Road.³⁶

Jammeh-Sidibe and Touray highlighted that both women and men formed *kafoolu* to attain specific objectives and to address the community's needs. These necessities varied from one community or village to another. With time and a rise in population, individual *kafoolu* represented distinct groups and their respective identities. For example, secret societies for blacksmiths, leather workers, farmers, women groups, age grade, and weavers represented the interests of members of these occupations.³⁷ Mostly, in these groups, women were under the guidance of men in craftwork. In urban areas, however, women became more independent in handicraft. They created their market, where they predominantly sold to tourists. These women seemed to be more prosperous than their rural counterparts, even when they crafted similar products, such as dyed cloth and other fabrics.³⁸

In rural Gambia, *kafoolu* became a means for women to join forces to promote their economic interests. They were created for socio-economic reasons aimed at improving members' income-generating potential by offering a support system for women's businesses and trades to become relevant actors in the informal sector of the country's economy.³⁹ Individual women, however, faced challenges when attempting to secure a living or profits from commercial activities.⁴⁰ By forming these groups, they exerted more pressure on local and regional leaders to protect their interests.

Further, members of *kafoolu* have been mostly farmers. The Banjulinding, Bakau, Sukuta Women and the Ndemban Garden Associations are examples of *kafoolu*. The Gambia Women Farmers' Association (NAWFA) was much later created as an umbrella body.⁴¹ Involvement in food production made many of these women breadwinners within their households.⁴² They engaged in horticultural ventures and the breeding of livestock for the provincial market, *lumo*, and the Islamic feast *tobaski*. These women's labor contributed to the country's economy. Still, these women's ability to shape economic policy or gain political influence remained limited and subject to male authority.

Women formed *Kafoolu* and their membership includes mostly women. Men, however, have a limited presence in *kafoolu* to help women with certain labor sometimes, including fencing gardens and digging wells. These co-opted male members made up between three and five men, and they took part as associate members.⁴³ These men served as advisers and helped women with their records sometimes. The members sometimes had their organizations' aims and objectives recorded in written documents. Even when that was not the case, they agreed about their goals and know them by heart.⁴⁴

Kafoolu were instrumental in the collaborative work of their communities. Their act of voluntary service in their communities predated colonial rule. They took part in social and religious activities, such as funerals and naming ceremonies. Members of *kafoolu* played a complementary role to men to clear farms, weeding, and harvesting. They worked on individual farms as a way of mutual aid to their fellow members or sometimes for cash for their labor. They partook in other duties, such as fetching water and firewood and community cleaning. Besides cash, they received grains such as rice, corn, and millet in return for their services. Members would visit somebody's farm, such as that of a relatively wealthy person, a very respectable individual, or a successful merchant. They would also help the needy, who were incapable of working on their farm. They also involved members in other economic ventures such as soap making and cloth dying to support themselves.⁴⁵

Despite Gambian women's efforts and contributions to development of their communities, the colonial system was discriminatory in its efforts to organize Gambian political life. It restricted voting to the Colony, the area of jurisdiction under the direct administration of the British colonial government, and not every woman had the right to vote.⁴⁶ First, before a woman could exercise her franchise in Bathurst, it required such potential voters to possess property and have a steady income. Second, she had to be twenty-five years old and above at the time of election, either to vote or to run for office. Unlike the Colony, the colonial system deprived women living in the Protectorate of such legal rights or privileges as enjoyed by women that lived in Bathurst. In practical terms, women in the provinces were out rightly disfranchised. Two years before introducing universal suffrage in 1960, chiefs refused female voting rights at the constitutional conference. In contrast, they granted the man's legal rights with or without property.⁴⁷

There was disagreement between the Colony and the Protectorate's delegates over women's right to vote. Bathurst politicians were advocating for women's suffrage, but their counterparts were reluctant because they believed granting voting rights to rural women would cause insubordination to their husbands. Illustrating Gambian women's long struggle in politics, J. H Price quotes a renowned historian of West African History, Michael Crowder, stating:

...one chief replied that he has seen the trouble caused in Bathurst by giving the women the vote and they didn't want any palaver with their women. I asked an Upper River Division chief later why he wouldn't accept the principle of women voting in the protectorate. He replied that personally he did not mind the idea, but chiefs living near Bathurst had painted a grim picture of the troubles the men had with women because of politics. So he thought it best not to let it happen in the chiefdom.⁴⁸

For these chiefs, female suffrage intrinsically could undermine male authority. These controversies left delegates failing to reach a consensus on equal voting rights. This conference, held in Brikama on October 18 through 25, 1958, was historic, giving rise to the 1960 Constitution that adopted Universal Adult Suffrage. This marked a significant development in Gambian politics because, for the first time, there was equal suffrage for adult men and women without discrimination.⁴⁹ The presence of women delegates, Cecilia Moore, and Rachel Palmer from Bathurst, gave women's issues a momentum in national discussion and the way forward.

Two subsequent conferences continued in Georgetown and Bathurst in January and March 1959, before the suffrage ultimately took effect in 1960 following the first House of Representatives election.⁵⁰ That said, this disenfranchisement of women shows an interconnectedness between the British colonial policy and indigenous patriarchal values that limited women's opportunity to take part in public life.

Path to Independence

Activism reinforced and heightened the decolonization process of The Gambia. The press and labor leaders turned nationalist leaders were the vanguards of the campaign against colonial authority, and their anti-colonial struggle played a vital role in the struggle for independence. Women journalists such as Marion Foon, Cecilia Moore, and Harriet Camara fought against colonial government anti-press laws, particularly the Newspaper Ordinance Act of 1944. This Law aimed to gag a free press with an increased burden of bond and license fees. Some laws restricted private newspapers from covering stories at the Statehouse. While they opposed and exposed bad legislation, they promoted women's issues and the liberation struggle of Africans and Blacks elsewhere. The *Vanguard* newspaper became synonymous with the plight of farmers under the leadership of Foon as its news editor and editor-in-chief in 1958 and 1960, respectively.

The mid-twentieth century witnessed the wooing of *kafoolu* and *kompins* by the emerging political parties. This quest to appeal to these women's organizations was pursued with the goal of benefiting from women's endorsement. The Gambia Democratic Party [GDP], Gambia Muslim Congress [GMC], and United Party [UP] all targeted the *kompins*. The colonial government outlawed political activities in rural Gambia [the area governed by traditional rulers called chiefs who were under the supervision of the colonial administration].⁵¹ It was a strategic move by the British to prevent the rise of nationalism or independence movements among its subjects but also to contain the use of violence as experienced in other British colonies. In colonial Kenya nationalist groups, notably the Mau Mau Movement clashed violently with British colonial authorities as they protested discriminatory and exploitative land policies that favored white settlers.⁵² Fearful of a similar outcome in The Gambia, British authorities limited indigenous political parties' influence on local politics in urban areas.

The four political parties formed in the 1950s were relatively inclusive. Hannah Forster helped in financing and establishing GDP on February 25, 1951, led by Rev. John Colley Faye. She established the party's women's wing, became a prominent *yai kompini* and a resourceful mobilizer during the 1954 legislative council elections. She was a wealthy entrepreneur and among the country's first women political activists.⁵³ A year earlier, in 1953, Governor Wyn-Harris appointed her to the Consultative Committee for a new constitutional proposal. In 1959, Forster also urged provincial chiefs to enfranchise rural women by participating in politics at the All-Party Conference held in Georgetown. In the same way, women supported Garba Jahumpa's GMC formed in January 1952.⁵⁴ Under the leadership of Yadicone Njie, Bathurst women endorsed Pierre Sarr Njie when he became the leader of UP in 1954.⁵⁵ Because women proved active mobilizers and volunteers, and effective in amplifying political messages, most parties recognized the necessity of involving them, increasing their visibility in the political

space. This was clearly the case with Rachel Palmer, who was the only woman out of the ten delegates at the London Constitutional Conference of 1961.⁵⁶

Socio-economic conditions in Bathurst and Kombo St. Mary's drove the rapid development of women's grassroots organizations.⁵⁷ Through their collective action, women opposed colonial policies. Traders at the Albert market organized to protect themselves from colonial tax collectors and public health officials' harsh treatment. The 1920s exemplified a mass demonstration of women in Bathurst against price increases.⁵⁸ Essentially, these forms of collective actions were means of empowerment for their members. Women's resistance against colonial taxation laws was also found in other parts of Africa, such as the Tamne-Mende crisis in Sierra Leone and the Akan protest in Gold Coast in the last years of the nineteenth century. Marc Matera et al. provide extensive historical analyses of Aba women's resistance in 1929. The British colonial administrators in Southeastern Nigeria imposed special taxes on the Igbo market women, which culminated in protest between market women against colonial government and the warrant chiefs.⁵⁹ Similarly, the Abeokuta Women's Union under the leadership of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti led a series of protests between 1940s and 1950s against tax increments. Those protests were a major cause of the abdication of Oba Ademola II, then reigning *Alake*, the traditional ruler of Egba, in January 1949. The Women's Union also advocated for enfranchisement of all women in Nigeria.⁶⁰ In Guinea, in 1948, the market women defied colonial regulation and market taxes. By 1955, these women got the colonial government to reduce taxes.⁶¹ Based on this reason, these actions led to the growing interest in self-help groups.

The formation of women's grassroots organizations in The Gambia empowered women to challenge the status quo. This is certainly true with the Women's Contemporary Society and Women's Federation, two organizations that promoted political awareness and women's rights. One of the founding members of these organizations was Augusta H.M. Jawara, who became the first woman to run for a national election in 1960 under the PPP ticket. Through these organizations, Lady Jawara built a powerful network and support for the PPP. She led a group that took part in house-to-house campaigning and spoke to women's groups. Yet, she lost Soldier Town to her male opponent, Alieu Badara Njie, the candidate of the Democratic Congress Alliance (DCA).⁶² Lady Jawara's candidacy was a litmus test for women's ability to win national elections.

In 1965, The Gambia attained independence and held its first referendum the same year. The citizens were to decide whether to change the political system from a parliamentary monarchy to a republic.⁶³ Women were visible in celebrations of independence as they chanted and danced on that momentous day of February 18, 1965. Almost every woman had sewn a new dress bearing the face of D.K. Jawara with inscriptions such as the Gambia independence of 1965 or progress, peace, and prosperity. Since the eve of independence, women dressed in a variety of colors. Several people arrived from upriver districts to join the rest at the McCarthy Square.⁶⁴ Around midnight, they brought down the Union Jack and replaced it with the Gambian flag. Its colors of red, white, blue, white, green were displayed on the flagpole while fireworks lit the sky and people sang the national anthem and liberation songs in unison.⁶⁵ It was an emotional moment, as Gambians looked forward to a better future. The weeklong

celebration started three days earlier. There was jubilation everywhere, in every village and every corner of the country.⁶⁶

Nine months after The Gambia's independence, the first referendum on becoming a republic was held on November 26, 1965. However, it lost because of the government's inability to achieve a two-thirds majority.⁶⁷ Most of the electorate seemed to be unaware of the relevance of the referendum or what sovereignty entailed. The referendum would give people the mandate to make informed choices that would facilitate constitutional change, stipulate the type of government, and shape various institutions to run the affairs of the state of Gambian people. It gauged whether the electorate preferred to govern themselves or to be governed by a foreign power, and if citizens would cut the umbilical cord between the country and its former colonial master. Some politicians, however, opposed the proclamation of a republican state, stating that the country was unprepared for a transition because of its limited resources. The United Party and its leader, Pierre S. Njie, strongly disapproved of the republican state. They felt it was abrupt and unwise for the people to take total control to run the affairs of the state. Many were of the view that the country's future statehood was uncertain, and its high poverty rate would cause its failure.⁶⁸ This referendum, therefore, failed to attain the two-third majority by less than eight hundred votes.

Partnership of Women and Political Leadership

Gambian politicians have used political patronage to gain support. This practice was clear in the 1960s, with the emergence of new political parties competing for a strong political base. They promoted ethnicity and regionalism for political ends. While women mobilized to secure political patronage. This resulted in fostering division between the urban and rural areas. British officials purposefully created political fragmentation by encouraging regional political identities. For example, the formation of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) was a major political shift because, until 1959, the rural population was unrepresented. Thus, it came to symbolize the marginalized Protectorate. The extension of enfranchisement to the rural areas exacerbated the struggle for recognition among parties. Knowing the political rivalry between the UP and the PPP, Governor Sir Edward Henry Windley in 1961 appointed Pierre S. Njie as the First Chief Minister despite UP having a smaller number of seats [five versus nine seats of the PPP]. As a protest to this appointment, Jawara, and Sheriff Sisay resigned from the Executive Council. Therefore, the 1962 election cemented partisanship and political patronage in the country's history.⁶⁹ During this election, the major parties were UP and the PPP. The leader of UP Pierre S. Njie, who was also the Chief Minister, gained the support of the chiefs.⁷⁰ The PPP, however, embarked on a face-to-face campaign and concentrated on the farmers' support.⁷¹ From this date onwards, the PPP came to symbolize with rural population had been legally excluded from national political scene by the colonial government.

Kafoolu and *kompins* provided resources and support for political parties. As shown previously, women's collective action led political parties to recognize their potential local influence and seek the support of women's organizations during elections. *Kompins* became political allies with GMC, UP, and PPP who sought to work with these women groups. They directly linked with women's wing of political parties led by *yai kompins*. In other word, a *yai kompins* literary means "mother of association" but technically it refers to a female leader or

representative. They have played mentorship roles for community members and have made sure that members recognize the need to take part in development work. Through these activities, they have become a strong mobilization force instrumental to politics. Most interviewees agreed that post-menopausal women assume the position of *yai kompins*. These women are eloquent, relatively “wealthy,” and from “important” families—traits that propelled them to a position of leadership. Many were the wives or daughters of important local men, such as politician, an imam, *alkalo* or successful trader themselves.⁷² They are opinionated, skillful individuals who worked to expand their organization’s political engagement with a diverse national population. Women’s grassroots organizations endorsed and canvassed votes for their candidates during elections because voters listened to them. They sometimes supported the political goals of men close to them. They also hired vehicles to transport voters to polling stations.⁷³

Kafoolu and *kompins* embarked on fundraising and persuasion, facilitating political conversations and local diplomacy. They collaborated with the Women’s Bureau, an institution the Gambia government put in place to investigate policies concerning women issues. It aimed to promote women in national development.⁷⁴ Through them, politicians could collaborate with urban and rural women for political gains. Much of that influence was also the product of the effective advocacy of these women. Using contributions of their members, women’s organizations supplemented the organization and entertainment efforts of political parties and candidates, providing *asobee*, food, water, and drinks for their political gatherings.⁷⁵

Equally significant in this regard, *kafoolu* and *kompins* have increased women’s political engagement through the organization of political activities.⁷⁶ Their pivotal role in the 1970 referendum emblemizes their achievement of political influence at a decisive moment in Gambian history. During the changeover to a republican form of government, Prime Minister Jawara faced opposition again after his administration held the referendum, but only this time around, the Gambia Workers’ Union remained neutral. However, the period witnessed the declining influence of political hostility partly due to skillful use of patronage and alliances and mergers of the opposition. The UP and PPA for example strongly opposed the republican bill.⁷⁷ But in October 1969, women in Saba assured Jawara that they would campaign for its success. Similarly, in Fass Chaho, women affirmed their support during Jawara’s visit.⁷⁸ Women were therefore at the forefront of the PPP campaign for the republic. Gambian women were loyal followers of the PPP leader. Their position was not grounded so much on political ideology but on the notion that “God chooses a leader,” more of a cheerleader role. He was charismatic and had the firm support of women. As a result, the UP, which opposed the call for a republican status, failed to secure the majority vote. The success of the PPP during this referendum made many personalities from various parties to shift allegiance to the PPP. This erratic changing of loyalty speaks volumes about the country’s political leadership and its direction.

It is difficult to pin down women’s situation in The Gambia when political marginalization dogged their participation. While the 1950s saw the formation and rise of political parties in the Bathurst colony, 1970 witnessed the establishment of the republican state which reinforced mobilization for popular support. This changing political dynamics influenced mass mobilization by politicians and an increasing number of *kompins* and *kafoolu*. From all

indications, the political relationship and collaboration that existed between women and the country's political leaders remained asymmetrical. These women used their resources, energy, and time, but their compensation has been inconsequential compared to their political input. They calculated politicians would work to create solutions to their problems by providing them with social amenities such as markets, schools, boreholes, health centers, and good roads and provide jobs for their children. By focusing their efforts on securing votes for their candidates, instead of promoting critical political debate on policy issues, women in these organizations ended up doing the bidding of political parties. As prime minister, Jawara had the authority to appoint the cabinet members of his government. All eight appointed ministers were men. Lucretia St. Claire Joof became the first Gambian woman to be nominated in the House of Representatives in 1968.⁷⁹

Though Gambian women have contributed individually, they have been increasingly instrumental through collective action. This is made evident by the fact that the ability of these women to contribute to this referendum was connected to their extensive networks across the country, specifically the *kafoolu*'s well-established history in rural Gambia and *kompins*' political trajectory in Bathurst. These women's organizations grew their members' socioeconomic and political advancement. Such collectivity was a useful mechanism in partnership with politicians and contributed to the success of the referendum. Notwithstanding, this relationship culminated into political patronage between the *kafoolu/kompins* and the male-dominated parties and the government.

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Notes

¹ Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997, pp. 99-152; Schmidt 2005, Ceesay 2007; Almeida 2014, pp. 4-25.

² Geisler 2004, p. 208.

³ *Kafoo* [pl. *kafoolu* meaning traditional associations in Mandinka] operates in rural and peri-urban areas. While *kompins* [meaning associations/ organizations in Wolof] operate in urban settings. The name, however, does not affect the membership. Both *kafoolu* and *kompins* constitute different ethnolinguistic references of The Gambia. Binta Jammeh-Sidibe, telephone interview, July 31, 2020; Dusuba Touray, interview, Wuli Sutukonding, August 17, 2020.

- ⁴ All interviewees unanimously asserted that women **played** a crucial role in Gambian politics. Binta Jammeh-Sidibe affirmed that her mother was a very active *kafoo* leader since the 1960s whose efforts and other women shaped her political orientation in serving people. Her future husband, Bakary Sidibe was also very active in politics, and he was among the founding members of PPP. Sidibe was also a *kafoo* leader for men. Some interviewees claimed that women even sold their valuable such as jewelries to invest in politics in the 1960s and the 1970s.
- ⁵ Jawara 2009, p. 274.
- ⁶ *The Point Newspaper*, 27 April 2009, p. 2.
- ⁷ Six months prior to the referendum, the Republic Bill was published and approved by the House of Representatives.
- ⁸ Hughes and Perfect 2006, pp. 1-2.
- ⁹ "Gambia 2013 Population Census," n.d. <https://www.gbosdata.org/downloads/census-2013>
- ¹⁰ Rice 1967.
- ¹¹ Sanneh 2013, p. xxviii.
- ¹² Sanneh 2013, p. xxviii.
- ¹³ See Ceesay 2007; Almeida 2014.
- ¹⁴ Hughes and Perfect 2006; Saho 2018; Sonko-Godwin 2014; Saine 2012; Wright 2018; Grey-Johnson 2013; Schroeder 1996; Kea 2010; Sarr 2019; Carney 1993.
- ¹⁵ Steady 2006; Schmidt 2005; Geiger 1987, pp. 489-506; Ampofo, et al. 2008, pp. 327-41.
- ¹⁶ Ampofo, et al. 2008, pp. 328-29.
- ¹⁷ Some of Aku's descendants came from different parts of West Africa particularly, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. For an insightful reading, see Sonko-Godwin 2014, pp. 177-240.
- ¹⁸ National Archive file C.58S; CSO 3/205 "Appointment of unofficial representation of Legislative Council."
- ¹⁹ Sonko-Godwin 2014, p. 148.
- ²⁰ Some of these organizations had engaged in philanthropic work such as the women's corona society that supplied food and clothing to the poor and needy in the Gambian society.
- ²¹ *Osusu* is monetary contributions [but not limited to monetary value] that has been accumulated by members of a group.
- ²² Wolof dance of which sounds are created from the beating drum(s).
- ²³ See Ceesay 2007, pp. 43, 70.
- ²⁴ See Sonko-Godwin 2014, pp. 225-30.
- ²⁵ See Ceesay, p. 41.
- ²⁶ Ceesay, pp. 40-41.
- ²⁷ *New Gambia*, 11 March 1966, p. 2.
- ²⁸ Saho 2018, pp. 120-21.
- ²⁹ The plaintiff who filed against Rex in 1887, was a coos seller locally called *chereh* at Albert market and was alleged of stealing a bag worth two pounds along with few other items after involving in a barter trade with a destitute who wanted a plate of *chereh* but had no money instead gave her the bag. This act of fair exchange led to her arrest and detention at the

Bathurst police station up to the time market women contributed to pay for the said amount. Due to this humiliation, she hired two outstanding men lawyers, Renner Maxwell and John C. Gray, to defend her. Eventually, she won the case. Despite the harsh policies of colonial rule, these women used the legal and economic opportunities to their advantage in the urban area-- details found in Saho, p. 61.

³⁰ Interview with Njaga Jawo, Wellingara, 9 October 2020.

³¹ Telephone interview with Swaibou Touray, 17 October 2020.

³² Interview with Sulayman Touray, Brikama, 11 October 2020.

³³ Telephone interview with Binta Jammeh-Sidibe, July 31, 2020; interview with Omar B. Jallow, Serekunda, 28 July 2020.

³⁴ Saho 2018, pp. 120-21.

³⁵ The five Administrative Regions of The Gambia were referred to as Divisions before they were changed in 2007. These divisions were Western Division, North Bank Division, Lower River Division, Central River Division and Upper River Division and Banjul City.

³⁶ Although early settlers came to Bathurst in large numbers, they were fragmented. They constituted Europeans who arrived from Senegal with their servants and technicians who were contributory to the construction of the colonial city. There was a group who arrived in search of greener pasture as in the case of Serahuli and Badibunkas. A few came for educational purposes and other opportunities that were available in the city. Among them was a group of settlers who came for safety reasons due to Muslim wars in the region for over five decades. For more detail, read Saho, 2018.

³⁷ Interview with Kaddy Dibba, Sukuta Nema, 11 October 2020; Hon. Touray is a sitting National Assembly member for Wuli East since 2017.

³⁸ Interview with Aja Sima, Bakau, 11 October 2020.

³⁹ Telephone conversations with interviewees: Na Fanta Fatty, Basse, 10 September 2020; Lisa Kanteh, Bundung Borehole, 1 October 2020; Aja Faya Camara, Touba Kotou, Wuli, 15 August 2020; and Kaddy Dibba, Sukuta Nema, 11 October 2010.

⁴⁰ Telephone interview with Na Fanta Fatty, Basse, 10 September 2020.

⁴¹ Ya Sainabou Panneh was a leader of both *kafoo* and *kompin* in the North Bank Region. She has been instrumental in politics from Presidents Jawara, Jammeh to Barrow regimes as a *yai kompini*; telephone interview with the former speaker of the Gambia National Assembly, Fatoumata Jahumpa-Ceesay, 28 August 2020.

⁴² Carney and Watts 1990, pp. 207-41; Fourshey 2019; Vanderwal et al. 2011, pp. 6-47; Moseley et al. 2010, pp. 5774-79.

⁴³ Jaga Jawo was an agriculture extension and development worker. His work exposed him to every part of the country, and he has been working with *kafoolu* across The Gambia.

⁴⁴ Telephone interview with Na Fanta Fatty, Tamba Sansan, Basse, 10 September 2020; Interview with Aja Faya Camara, Touba Kotou, Wuli, 15 August 2020.

⁴⁵ Interview with Mawdo Jatta, Wuli, 18 October 2020; Telephone interview with Na Fanta Fatty, Basse 10 September 2020.

- ⁴⁶ The Governor (with the assistance of the Legislative and Executive Councils) was responsible for administering the colony. He was accountable to the Secretary of State for the colonies. It is important to note that the British colonial rule led to dividing the country into Colony and Protectorate. While the former was directly governed by the British, they used the indirect rule system to administer the latter.
- ⁴⁷ Ceesay 2007, p. 94.
- ⁴⁸ Quoted in Price, J.J. 1958. "Some notes on the influence of women in Gambian politics." Conference proceedings, Institute of Social and Economic Research (December), pp. 151-58.
- ⁴⁹ Perfect 2016, p. 99.
- ⁵⁰ Governor Edward Windley was crucial in this process based on his efforts in convening these conferences. David Perfect claimed that Windley was receptive to Gambians' proposal for constitutional reforms unlike his predecessor.
- ⁵¹ See Sonko-Godwin 2014, p. 85; Sonko-Godwin 1995, p. 70.
- ⁵² The Protectorate was excluded from national politics. See Hughes and Perfect 2006, pp. 134-39; Hughes 1975, pp. 62-65.
- ⁵³ Almeida 2014, pp. 5-6.
- ⁵⁴ Ceesay, *Weekend Observer*, February 7-9, 1995.
- ⁵⁵ Most of the developments that occurred in women's struggle happened in the city. There was little evidence about women's political strife in the rural areas. From the evidence, one reason for this was the influence of Islamic religion and the practice of patriarchal culture. To many, the joy of womanhood was to have a successful marriage, and one's children become thriving in their endeavor as breadwinners of their families and good wives and mothers in their matrimony.
- ⁵⁶ The delegates composed of Rachel Palmer, M.E Jallow, Henry Madi who represented the independent voices, Omar Mbacke represented the chiefs, David Jawara, and Sheriff Saikouba Sisay for the PPP, I.M Jahumpa and Rev. J.C. Fay for Democratic Congress Alliance, while United Party was represented by P.S Njie and Michael Baldeh. Palmer's father was a secretary to the Legislative Council through she developed interest and helped her father in writing minutes and clerical works where politicians knew. Her nomination was unanimously accepted said in her 1995 interview with the Foroyaa Newspaper. See "Women's Affairs," *Foroyaa Newspaper*, May 10, 1995.
- ⁵⁷ Ceesay 2020, pp. 32-36.
- ⁵⁸ Ceesay 2020, p. 33.
- ⁵⁹ Matera et al. 2012, pp. 1-11.
- ⁶⁰ See Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997, pp. 63, 94-95.
- ⁶¹ Schmidt 2005, p. 122.
- ⁶² DCA was a merger of the Gambia Muslim Congress [GMC] and the Gambia Democratic Party [GDP] in March 1960. Soon after that, the party became inactive due to a slip-up of GMC to form Gambia Congress Party in October 1962. After three years in 1965, DCA merged with the PPP.

- ⁶³ There were controversies around the Independence because political leaders had different views on how to run the affairs of the state. Garba Jahumpa and P.S Njie's viewpoints failed to project complete freedom. Instead, they supported delaying independence. D.K Jawara and some PPP members, on the other hand, demanded immediate internal self-rule in 1961.
- ⁶⁴ See Rice 1967, pp. 21-27; Jawara 2009, pp. 245-46.
- ⁶⁵ Mrs. Julia Howe wrote the country's national anthem.
- ⁶⁶ See Jawara 2009, pp. 245-46.
- ⁶⁷ Hughes and Perfect 2006, p. 2.
- ⁶⁸ Sanneh 2013, p. xxviii.
- ⁶⁹ Hughes 1975, pp.61-62.
- ⁷⁰ Despite Njie's appointment by the Governor General to head the Executive, full self-government was not attained until 1963.
- ⁷¹ Hughes 1975, p. 62; Telephone interview with Suwaibou Touray, 17 October 2020; Interview Alagie Jambo Camara, Sutukonding, 15 August 2020. Among the interviewees, Camara and Jatta gave an insightful discussion of the contestation for power between the UP and the PPP.
- ⁷² Ya Haddy Panneh's late husband was an *alkaloo* of Njawara in the North Bank Region. She succeeded him to chieftaincy during the Second Republic after facing opposition before she was unanimously approved. Aja Fanta Basse's husband was a Governor-General representing Queen Elizabeth II before the republic. Fatounding Jatta was a successful merchant. Aja Fatou Sallah was also a strong woman of Muslim Congress and Democratic Alliance parties in the 1950s and 1960s.
- ⁷³ Interview with Alagie Demba Sisawo, Sutukoba, 13 August 2020; Telephone interview with Fatoumata Jahumpa-Ceesay, 28 August 2020; Telephone interview with Neneh Isatou Jallow, 8 October 2020; Interview with Sulayman Touray, Brikama, 11 October 2020.
- ⁷⁴ Jawara, p. 361; Interview with Alagie Jambo Camara, Sutukonding, 15 August 2020.
- ⁷⁵ *Asobee* is a party-uniform [resemblance of a garment worn by members of an association during occasions]. It is not restricted to women, but they popularized this idea as an illustration of membership, cooperation, and unity. The word *asobee* may have originated from a Yoruba word, "*aso ebi*" meaning cloth or dress worn by family [but not limited to] for self-identification or show solidarity and friendship during ceremonies.
- ⁷⁶ Ceesay 2020, p. 31; Almeida, pp. 2-3.
- ⁷⁷ Such opposition was reflected on republic referendum results in Bathurst. For instance, 5,303 voted against to 3,288 voted for yes during that referendum in Bathurst.
- ⁷⁸ Ironically, the republican state witnessed the decline of a major opposition party, UP, who orchestrated the failure of the first referendum. Telephone interview with Omar Jallow, 18 July 2020; Interview with Ya Sainabou Panneh, Fass chaho, 30 August 2020; Jawara, p. 271.
- ⁷⁹ Earlier in August that year, a bill was passed to increase number of nominated members from two to four geared towards promoting women.